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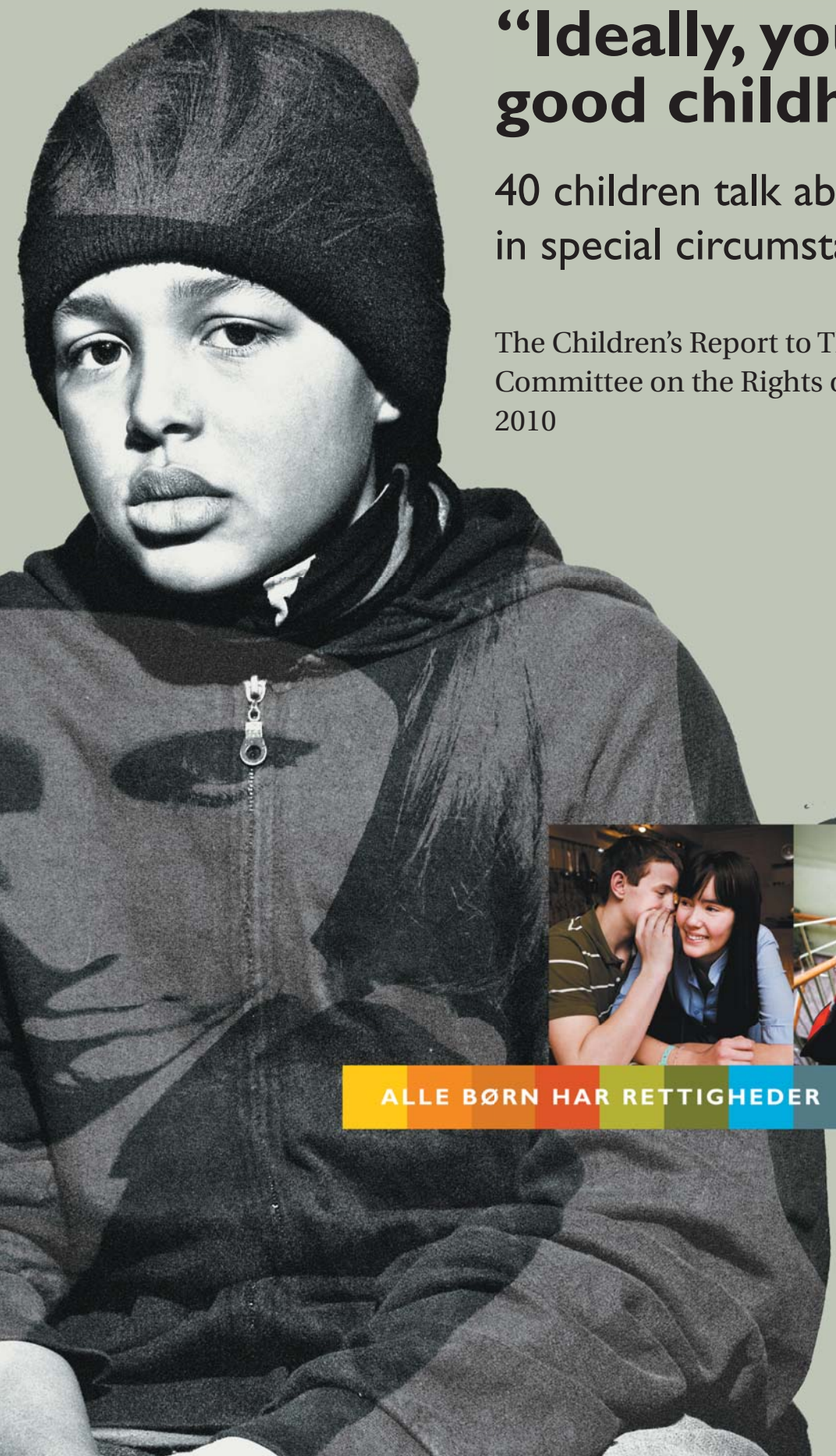
40 children talk about life in special circumstances

The Children’s Report to The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child
2010



ALLE BØRN HAR RETTIGHEDER

Børnerådet

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Contents

Introduction

In this report, a number of children present their own individual perspectives on life as a child "in special circumstances". The Danish National Council for Children has interviewed 40 children[1], all of whom in various ways experience greater difficulties in life than the majority of children in Denmark. While each of their accounts presents a unique state of affairs, all are reflective of the more general circumstances of vulnerable children, for which reason they provide voice for a much larger group of such children in Denmark.

Children in special circumstances comprise a very diverse group ranging between the ages of 0 and 18 years. All have particular need of care and attention and for adults to speak out on their behalf. In this report, the following seven groups are represented:

- Children living in poverty
- Children suffering from overweight
- Children who have experienced violence in the home
- Children with disabilities
- Children of asylum seekers
- Children and young adults involved in crime
- Children of inmates

There are two reasons why these particular groups have been selected. Firstly, many of these children's circumstances are dealt with in the Council's main report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child 2009[2], in which the Council identifies a range of areas in need of improvement for vulnerable children in particular. The Council considers it imperative to ensure that vulnerable children's own views and perspectives are incorporated into discussion of how their circumstances may be improved.

Secondly, it is the considered opinion of the Council that these groups have not previously to any appreciable extent been heard in the public debate.

The knowledge we as adults have of children is at best merely a supplement to children's own knowledge of their condition. While it remains vital for adult experts to express themselves on a solid professional basis, only children themselves know how it actually *feels* to be a child. We believe that knowledge to be a crucial element in continued work towards improving children's rights and circumstances. For this reason, the Council here provides vulnerable children with a voice in the context of its reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Life as a child: Denmark 2010

Most children in Denmark lead a good life. They have families who support them, good friends, and fruitful relationships with their teachers. They live in families with the means to engage in leisure-time activities, to own computers and mobile phones, and

1 The interviewed children have been given fictitious names. The Council is familiar with their proper identities.

2 *Report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. Supplementary Report to Denmark's 4th Periodic Report*. The National Council for Children. The report is freely available at www.brd.dk/fn-konvention/dokumenter.

to purchase new clothes. They consider themselves successful at school, happy and full of energy. These are the overall tendencies appearing in a report just completed by the Council's Children Panel.[3]

The picture, however, is by no means unambiguously positive. The survey also shows that a large group of children thrive neither at school nor in the home. Nine percent are seldom or never happy to go to school. One in ten has felt sad or worried within the previous week. Six percent always or very often feel lonely, while nine percent never, seldom or only once in a while feel that their parents have time for them. Children who consider themselves weak in terms of schoolwork also to a large extent experience problems in the family and among friends, as well as in other social contexts.

Previous surveys of the Council's Children's Panel have reached similar results: For a variety of reasons, some 15 percent of children in Denmark fail to thrive. Their particular circumstances combine to make their lives that much more difficult than those of their schoolmates. Common to them all is the fact that their parents and others close to them have been unable to provide them with secure, healthy and developmentally advantageous conditions in which to grow up. These are the children and young adults whom in many contexts are considered to be particularly vulnerable.

A child's perspective [is] one which issues from the child's experience, takes children seriously, listens attentively to children, and not least: sees children as important players in the process that aims at making life good for them. The child's perspective is an expression of the wilful strategy of viewing children as equal partners. Only such efforts as are based on the child's perspective will be capable of making a positive contribution to the child's ability to take charge of its own life and those challenges it meets along the way.

Per Schultz Jørgensen, *Udsatte børn – et helhedsperspektiv* [Vulnerable Children: A Holistic Perspective], 2008

While the 40 children interviewed by the Council all are different and live in a range of different circumstances, a number of common challenges may be identified across their individual accounts. Like all children, they want to be a part of communities, to have friends and to be happy at school. However, a large number of them reveal that they care neither for school, nor their teachers, and that they feel bullied by schoolmates.

Bullying and the vulnerable child

Feeling different, being ostracised or teased are just a couple of the experiences that recur in our interviews. The children feel left out and see themselves as outsiders. Many

3 The Council's Children's Panel comprises 1841 children attending 92 4th grade classes throughout Denmark. From their beginning 4th grade in August 2009 until leaving 6th grade four years later, they will fill in electronic questionnaires from the Council on 2 or 3 occasions each year. The questions to be addressed concern the children's views on and experiences of a wide range of issues. The first survey of the new Panel paints a broad picture of the lives of children from 9 to 11 years of age. The results are laid out in a report entitled *Portræt af 4. klasse – 2009*, published by the Council in March 2010.

vulnerable children are subjected to bullying, yet if recent research into the subject is to be believed, the real reason is not to be found in children being overweight, disabled, having a father in prison or the family being unable to afford brand clothing. Bullying is in essence a sign of intolerance and lack of solicitude in the child's environment, e.g. school. Often, it arises as an expression of a particular classroom culture building on exclusion rather than inclusion. Thus, being different is often turned against the individual. Although bullying impacts not only on those lacking in resources or those who in some way are different, such children are very often made to bear the brunt when a class needs a new victim.

Accounting for bullying exclusively from a perspective of particular character traits of the victim or the bully may prove a slippery slope indeed, insofar as doing so shifts focus away from the context. Yet if and when a culture of bullying may be ascribed to a certain school class, it is often the case that vulnerable children are made extra vulnerable. Children may find themselves particularly exposed when affected by serious social events such as divorce or death in the family. There is much to indicate that children "in deficit" also risk being bullied, much more so than children with a clear sense of life quality. When a child's father is serving a prison sentence, when a child experiences violence in the home, or when a child is overweight and feels repulsive to others, these are all factors of great significance for the child's happiness and well-being, as well as impacting heavily on the child's self-esteem. Moreover, when class culture is neither inclusive nor receptive, low self-esteem will often trigger bullying. Thus, the child's personal circumstances or history may impact in a variety of ways to reinforce the problem. Indeed, many of the accounts the interviewed children provide may be seen as examples of this.

As long as the social context remains unsupportive of children who are different and socially vulnerable, those children will remain stigmatised and marginalised. Such marginalisation will be apparent in the child's most proximate social landscape, e.g. where bullying occurs, as well in the greater societal context, where the long-term consequences may prove to be insufficient education, poor mental health, unemployment, crime, etc.

Small shoulders, big responsibilities

Another recurrent theme in the children's accounts concerns the fact that vulnerable children often assume very major responsibilities for their age. These are varied in nature and highly dependant upon the child's individual circumstances. At a centre for asylum-seekers we met children who, despite the weight of their own uncertain situations, as well as the traumatising nature of their pasts, do their utmost not to share their worries with their mothers. They put aside their own needs, to the best of their abilities concealing their own unhappy state of mind out of a feeling of responsibility for their mothers' mental health. In our interviews with children belonging to families of insufficient means, this sense of responsibility was directed towards the family's economy. The children endeavoured not to ask for things, and a couple of respondents had even taken on the responsibility of managing their own finances, e.g. paying their own phone bills, paying for their clothes, eating out, etc. Compared to their peers, the responsibilities these children bore were considerable. Indeed, the children revealed that they felt themselves to be "more grown-up".

But is being *more grown-up* a good thing for a child? One of the children in question, whose childhood has been without the presence of stable adults, believed that children ought not to have the responsibilities of adults at all: "They should be allowed to be children."

Yet many children are considered vulnerable precisely on account of their parents proving unable to bear the responsibility of providing for their children's health and well-being. Such children therefore end up in a variety of ways taking on the responsibilities their parents cannot manage.

The Council believes that it is an important task of society to ensure that these children receive decent upbringings and opportunities for development. Public authorities, institutions, professional adults in the children's vicinity, civil society and the child's most proximate environments, all are responsible for ensuring the welfare of these children in cases in which their parents prove unable to cope.

The accounts of the 40 children included in this report show very clearly that in this respect there remains much room for improvement.


STOP

Children in families of insufficient means

Approximately 60,000 children in Denmark live in poverty, among them Alexander (14), Morten (15), Sanne (12), Jasmin (14) and Thomas (16). Their mothers have all applied for funds from a special programme for single mothers in order that they may take care of themselves and their children. Through this channel, the Council came into contact with the five children.

When lack of money impacts on community
All five children find that the scarcity of financial means imposes restrictions on what they can have and what kind of activities they can take part in compared to their classmates. All of them have seen classmates with new iPods, new clothes, films, music and smart mobile phones, and all are aware that their own families cannot afford such things. Many of them wear hand-me-downs from older relatives or acquaintances. Fourteen-year-old Alexander and his younger brother of 11 recently received a computer to share between them, the money for which came from the Lions Club. It was a necessary purchase, Alexander (who attends ninth grade) previously having to resort to the school library or borrow his mother's work computer – making it difficult for him to keep up, not only with schoolwork, but socially, too.

Sanne (12) would desperately like to have a Nintendo DSi. All her classmates bar three have one. Often, it means Sanne feels compelled to spend time with those three, since all the others are members of a social community based on playing Nintendo DSi. It's really annoying, she finds, and makes her feel left out of the social life of the class.

For Thomas (16), who lives in the provinces, the thing he misses most is a scooter. He is the only one among his friends without, and he relates in interview how miserable he feels always having to be a passenger and always having to rely on someone else for a ride home. Clearly, not having his own scooter is major hindrance to his involvement in the very significant communities of which Thomas is a member. Moreover, he finds he often must stay at home rather than going out bowling or to internet cafés, simply because he can't afford it.

Alexander is especially aware of not having money when the others in the class buy pizza for lunch. Once in a while he is able to borrow money from his mother, but mostly he tells his friends he just isn't hungry – or doesn't feel like pizza. Instead, he often chooses to skip lunch completely, or else he goes home to make a sandwich. This gives Alexander a strong feeling of being outside the community.

All five children find it embarrassing to talk about money with their friends. They consider it something not talked about and do their best to conceal their circumstances. Thomas says: "It's embarrassing and makes you feel small," to which Alexander adds: "It's not exactly the coolest thing to go around talking about. When others can see you're poor, they can tease you about it. But otherwise, I think I do a fairly good

job of covering it up." Although Alexander may to an extent be able to "cover it up", it is nonetheless clear that he feels set apart from the others in his class: "I'm mostly invisible in class, if you can put it like that. As if I'm not there. No-one really wants to be with me or talk to me or anything. I think it's because suddenly there's someone who's not like them. Someone who can't just buy what they want and go around with the latest gear. They don't want to be with him, he's like an 'outsider'. That's how I see myself compared to them."

"It's not exactly the coolest thing to go around talking about. When others can see you're poor, they can tease you about it. But otherwise, I think I do a fairly good job of covering it up."

Belonging and being popular

Popularity, and the signals people send as to their own worth and status, are from the children's point of view all about having money. The same can be seen in responses from our Children's Panel of fourth-graders. Here, 21% respond that the things you own are of great significance as to how you are regarded by friends. Similarly, 12% report that popularity depends on whether you are rich, good-looking, wear the right clothes and are interested in fashion. Owning the right gadgets and the right clothing brands is far from insignificant.

Sanne and Morten tell of money playing a major role in how popular a child is or may become. Sanne says: "Some have only 50 kroner a month, so they're not popular at all. If someone has 3000 kroner a month, then they're really popular. That's how it is. A lot of it's about what clothes you wear, and that sort of thing." The ability to be generous towards one's friends is also important, says Morten: "It's also to do with what you spend your money on. If you spend it all on shawarmas for yourself, it's going to have zero effect. But if you can give to your friends, you'll really take off and be popular really quickly!"

A shame for mum

The mothers of the children interviewed here were all either on transfer income (sickness benefit or invalidity pension) or had been until recently. Several of the children felt affected by their mother's poor health and lack of capacity for work. Jasmin can't stand to be home when her mother has her migraines and is confined to bed for days on end, but often she has to look after her younger siblings of 4, 6 and 9 years. All five children who were interviewed were, however, aware that their mothers often made sacrifices in order that their children should not have to suffer untowardly on account of the family's lack of means. When Jasmin was asked if she thinks a lot about money in her daily life, she replied: "Yeah, for example if I want to buy my mum a present. Because she never spends money on herself. She can't afford to, she says. So I'd like to be able to give her something once in a while."

Thomas often finds that his mother is annoyed – or, as Thomas himself puts it, "really ratty" – at not having much money. "Because she, like, sees all these things on telly that she wishes she had. Or else she'd like to be able to drive over to my sister's in Jutland. She really wants to go over there, because my sister's got a baby."

The children are often aware that the family's housekeeping is organised differently than that of their friends. Sanne and Morten have noticed that their mother often buys large quantities of cut-price goods to store in the freezer, or else she'll buy Christmas decorations *after* Christmas when they're cheap, and save them for Christmas to come. In their family, the two children do not

receive pocket money, though they are given a sum each month to cover everything from new clothes to sweets, pizza, mobile phone bills, savings, holidays and eating out with the family – a seldom occurrence. Although it can be hard to make their money last, both are able to see some sense in it. Sanne says: "I do get a bit jealous when I see what all the others get. Their parents pay their phone bills for them and everything. But on the other hand, it's pretty good to be able to manage things yourself. It gives you a kind of feeling of: This is what we've got, and it has to be made to last! You feel more grown-up." The children are clearly aware that they must pay for most of their things themselves. Once, Sanne was to go on a school trip, something she really wanted to be a part of, yet she wasn't sure she could afford it. "But then my mum paid for me! So I was really, really made up about it," she relates, clearly joyful at the thought.

"I do get a bit jealous when I see what all the others get. Their parents pay their phone bills for them and everything. But on the other hand, it's pretty good to be able to manage things yourself. It gives you a kind of feeling of: This is what we've got, and it has to be made to last! You feel more grown-up."

The taboo of poverty

Whether poverty exists at all in Denmark is a matter of political contention. Those children who are among the potentially poor care little for being associated with the concept. For them, it is something not to be talked about, and often they entertain quite different conceptions of what it means to be poor.

Nevertheless, Alexander himself mentions the word 'poor' when talking about his family. His mother once told him and his brother that they were poor, for which reason it was no good them pestering her for things. However, Alexander does not believe it to be an apt description of their predicament: "I'd rather say things aren't going too well for us economically. I don't like the word 'poor'. It's like you're splitting people up in two groups: those who are poor and those who are rich. I don't care for that much."

"I know we're poor – or at least we belong to that group people in Denmark. I do know that".

Many of the children we interviewed entertain a rather old-fashioned view of poverty. They associate the word with the poorhouse of Astrid Lindgren's literature, or with the conditions of children in the Third World. For instance, Sanne and Morten believe you are poor when "you can't afford anything and only get half an apple for dinner," or "if you have to lick the plate to feel you've eaten". Their understanding of the concept is keyed to very tangible entities, in particular food, clothes and a bed in which to sleep. They refer to themselves as "not well off" rather than poor. Jasmin, however, is not as reluctant to address the concept. She says: "I know we're poor – or at least we belong to that group of people in Denmark. I do know that. It's fairly obvious, really. And my mum's sort of told us. That we're like at the bottom in terms of money. We're not homeless, but we definitely don't have very much money."

NIKE
adidas

Children who are overweight

An increasing number of children are overweight. Regrettably, superfluous kilos are not the only problem these children experience. The Council interviewed Laura (11), Mette (12), Sandra (10), Anton (12) and Ida (11), all of whom have spent a period of time at a Christmas Seal House[4], motivated by the intention of losing weight, learning about healthy eating, meeting new friends and hopefully building self-confidence. Laura explains:
"I just wanted to get away. So I could be happier and get into shape. And to find the willpower to say no to that extra piece of cake."

Bullying
Not all, but most of the children we interviewed at the Christmas Seal House dislike school. They tell us about being teased. Sandra feels her life to be much different from that of the others; she feels lonely and left out. "If I ask if I can take part in a game, they always say 'No, you can't'. The girls go outside skipping, and they won't let me join in there, either. And if there are two girls playing Uno and I ask if I can join in, they just say they'd rather just be the two of them." Sandra also tells us about how the others used to hit her and kick her, and tease her about being fat. It started in third grade when she was new in class and quickly took the place of another boy as scapegoat. "There's a boy in my class who's actually really, really overweight. But he's been there from the start, and because when I started in third grade they thought it's me to be bullied," she says.

Sandra also tells us that even her own friend joins in the teasing. "I've got one friend in class. But sometimes she gets teased for being with me. And sometimes she goes along with it and joins in. I know it's not because she wants to hurt me. It's so she can survive herself … We've talked about it in class, but they keep on doing it. Our teacher brings it up only once a week, but never when it's actually going on."

Hard to be healthy at home
The five children at the Christmas Seal House are to a much greater extent than their peers interested in health and exercise. They dearly hope to be able to keep their weight down once their stay at the House has come to an end. That may prove difficult. As Ida says: "I think it'll be hard to keep up all the exercise we do here when I get home. I wouldn't be surprised to put on a couple of kilos again. It's like there aren't enough things to do at home. Here, there's a bouncy cushion and a trampoline. And I live in a house where there aren't that many stairs to run up and down. And the area we live in doesn't have the same kinds of places where you can go running."

"I think it'll be hard to keep up all the exercise we do here when I get home. I wouldn't be surprised to put on a couple of kilos again.

4 Institutions (four in total) funded in part by the sale of Christmas seals and providing recreational and recuperative stays (normally of ten weeks) for children suffering from problems such as overweight and bullying.

Exercise opportunity may be restricted at home, but the children's level of ambition, at least, cannot be faulted. Ida intends to start swimming twice a week, and on the other days she is going to go running in the mornings. "I really don't want to put on weight again – so something's got to be done," she says.

The children are aware that maintaining momentum may be difficult all the while they have no-one to be together with. "There are so many of the things we do here that we do together, but which are difficult to do alone, so it's going to be hard to keep up back home," says Anton.

Laura can see the problem, too. "If I want to go running or go for a bike ride, I've no-one to do it with, because my mum and dad are always too tired and they've got my brother and sister to worry about as well. They go to work early in the morning and are away all day. A lot of the time they're not home until five, maybe seven, in the evening."

The domestic lifestyle of the children's families of course plays a major role in the children's health. And while their parents are prepared to go a long way to changing eating habits, it's still an uphill struggle. The children are wholly dependant upon parental support – and not just as regards what to eat. Parents may not be aware that this is the case. Sandra tells us that she was forced to give up martial arts because it was too far away, and her father, according to her, didn't give going with her any kind of priority. "I wanted to go, but it was like … when my dad could go with me, or when he could be bothered, then we'd go. Or else he'd find some reason for us not being able to go: 'I can't find my bike', or 'I can't get my hands on a car', or 'I've no money for the train," Sandra says, imitating her father.

No money

Overweight and lack of means go hand in hand in many families. So it is, too, for some of the children we interviewed at the Christmas Seal House. Ida tells us that she feels different from the others in her class – not only because the other girls are slim, but also because they have "tons of money". This is apparent whenever she goes to their homes to play. There she can see all the things they have and "then it's easy to get a bit envious", she confides. "And when they're at mine I can feel a bit embarrassed that we've just got this crummy little flat."

"Your mum should be better at taking you out with her and going for a walk with the dog. Then you could have a really good talk. Once, we walked eleven kilometres."

An easier healthy life

The children readily agree that more exercise and a healthier diet is what is needed for them and others to lead a healthier life. At the same time, however, they acknowledge that it is easier said than done. When the children are asked about what specific things might be done, there is no shortage of ideas as how to make it easier for children to live a healthier life.

Sandra thinks it would be a good idea to get a dog. She would like to go for walks more often with the one they have. Yet, as the children touch upon several times during the course of the discussion, it's not just about exercising more. Equally important is exercising with others, and when they all also happen to entertain hopes of being more together with their parents – as is true of by far the greater majority of children in general – then it is hardly surprising when Sandra says: "Your mum should be better at taking you out with her and going for a walk with the dog. Then you could have a really good talk. Once, we walked eleven kilometres."

Laura would like to go to "some kind of fitness thing", but her mother has looked around and can't find anywhere that admits children. Laura concludes with disappointment: "You'd think they could have some places where children could go, too."

Moreover, all five children believe it to be important for healthy food to be cheap, whereas unhealthy food should be more expensive. Anton says: "I think they could change the prices of things. For example, sweets are really cheap and vegetables are expensive. So I think they could raise the price of sweets and make vegetables cheaper instead. At Netto you can get a bag of crisps for 7 kroner. So I'd be able to afford *two* bags of crisps. But I love oranges, and I've bought them loads of times instead of sweets on Saturdays, but a lot of the time they're too expensive for me to buy. That's the kind of thing I'd change."

Hearing of Anton's problems trying to resist unhealthy temptations at his local Netto, Ida recalls a programme she saw on television in which they replaced all the unhealthy goods at the supermarket checkout with healthy ones. "They sold out of the healthy things nearly every day," she relates. She thinks they should do the same in all shops.

Several of the children pinpoint school initiatives. Sandra suggests schools could organise walks – long walks. In fact, there should be more active school outings in general, and more gym lessons, she believes. Ida thinks schools should rethink the annual Exercise Day. Instead of doing it just once a year, they could do it before all school holidays. She explains: "It's in the holidays you put on weight. So if only there could be an exercise day *before* all the holidays … A lot of the time you give it all you've got on a day like that, instead of just normal when you're out for a run."

Last, though by no means least, the food on offer at schools and at recreation clubs is given short shrift. Laura tells us that the tuck shop at her school sells only white bread, rissoles, yoggies, chocolate and pizza. Anton is critical of the fact that his own recreation club offers hot chocolate: "It's really hard to say no when you can smell it – not to mention if everyone else is drinking the stuff. It's *so* tempting."

The children's suggestions as to how to prevent overweight:

- Set up more fitness centres for children
- Low prices on healthy foods – high prices on sweets and crisps
- Healthy foods at the checkout
- More organised walks from schools
- More gym lessons
- More active school outings
- More exercise days at school – e.g. before each holiday
- Better food in canteens and clubs
- Less cake in class discussion periods
- More walks with parents – e.g. when the dog needs walking

Children who experience violence in the home

More than 20,000 children in Denmark grow up in homes afflicted by violence. A study undertaken in 2007 shows that 13% of children in fifth grade are subjected to corporal punishment at home, while just as many are threatened with it. Each year, a handful of children die as a result of parental mistreatment. Moreover, a large number of children are witness to domestic violence. Studies show that in the long term, indirect violence of this nature is equally as damaging to the child psychologically as direct physical violence.

The Council interviewed four children, each of whom has experienced violence at home: Jakob (11), Ben (11), Caroline (8) and her sister Amalie (15). At present, they are staying at a crisis centre together with their mothers.

"… then eventually we came to the crisis centre"

Jakob has witnessed violence in the home on several occasions, yet finds it difficult to talk about. On the one hand he had difficulty comprehending what was going on. On the other, he was able to overhear most of what was said. He recalls at least four occasions, he says, and tells us about one of them:

"I was sitting in the living-room with my cat. My mum's boyfriend was out getting pizzas, but he was gone for a *really* long time – so long that we fetched a pizza ourselves and ate it. But then when he came home he was in a really bad mood. I just sat in the living-room with my cat, and they went out into the kitchen. And then they smashed some glasses and were shouting, both of them. They were really at each other. Afterwards my mum wasn't very well. I think that was the time she had to go to hospital."

Jakob reiterates that he has no idea what goes on between the adults and can merely sense when something is wrong, when they come and then storm off, or if something gets broken. Prior to him and his mother moving into the crisis centre, they were staying with his grandmother. However, since her husband, too, tended to become violent when drunk, they moved out following a particularly unpleasant experience.

"They were really at each other. Afterwards my mum wasn't very well. I think that was the time she had to go to hospital."

Eleven-year-old Ben and his younger brother Chris, aged 7, were both born in the Philippines, from where their mother hails. Seven years ago, she married a Danish man from whom she is now estranged after several years of violent marriage. Ben retains unpleasant recollections of life with his stepfather. Now, however, he is afraid the family will be sent out of the country.

When Ben and his mother lived with Ben's stepfather, they often saw him drunk and violent. On such occasions the adults fought vociferously. Whenever it happened, Ben was to call his mother's girlfriend and tell her to call the police. He explains why they moved into the crisis centre. His stepfather had been drunk and in a rage had smashed a bottle against Ben's mother's forehead, causing her to bleed. Ben and his younger brother were able only to hear what was going on. They were afraid and hid inside a cupboard. Only afterwards did they see the blood. Ben concludes his account by saying: "Then the police came and said we couldn't live there any more. Then they took my mum to the hospital. Me and Chris were taken to my mum's friend's. And now we're living here."

"He'd hit us with a newspaper. Like this, on the head.

Violence and threats of violence

While Jakob has 'merely' witnessed violence, Ben and his younger brother have both been subjected to physical as well as psychological violence at the hands of their stepfather. "He'd hit us with a newspaper. Like this, on the head. Once I was standing by the toilet waiting for my mum, and he hit me on the head because he was in a bad mood," Ben recalls.

One thing is the physical violence, but in families in which violence is frequent, other forms of humiliation and indignities are often part of the parcel. For instance, Ben and his brother would be forced to do things against their will. Ben recalls: "I'd eaten a sandwich. And then he comes home and says: Who hasn't tidied up after them? Because there was a packet of liver paste on the table. Then he got angry and says: Is it your mother who's responsible? And I say no. But he's sure it was my mum, so he tells me to take the liver paste and rub it in my mum's bed." Ben tells us that he had no wish to carry it out, but was forced to do so. When he broke down, his stepfather beat him and then continued to smear liver paste on the bed. Ben explains that his stepfather had been drinking and that he was always in a bad mood when drunk. Although Ben uses the expression 'in a bad mood', his accounts make it clear that his stepfather was hateful, calculating, and intent on instilling fear into the children and their mother.

A life in constant fear

Fifteen-year-old Amalie characterises her stepfather, the biological father of Caroline, 8, and Tobias, 6, as extremely violent and highly dangerous. "I mean, he's a *real* psychopath," she says. Physical and psychological violence in particular were predominant features of family life during long periods of time. During recent years, Tobias' and Caroline's father has moved in and out of the home many times, Amalie explains: "We couldn't get rid of him after Tobias and Caroline were born. They split up for a while a few times, but my mum always took him back, because it was easier for her to be with him than away from him. When he wasn't there he'd terrorise us all mentally and smash all our things and his own as well, and break down the door, so we were always having to run off. Then sometimes, if my mum just let him be with us, he could be really, really nice. So then she'd let him move in again, because she couldn't cope with all the trouble."

According to Amalie, her stepfather was quite normal and nice to them in the beginning, but at some point his character changed. "We thought he was so nice. That's what people think about him. They think he's really nice to begin with. We even called him Dad to start with. We really liked him and he took us to the swimming baths and everything. But then when my mum was having Caroline, it all started going wrong. Like if you spilled cocoa, he'd just freak out. So all through Tobias' and Caroline's lives he's been a total psychopath."

The transformation came as a shock to the family, who for a long time now have been forced to hide away and live a life in constant fear. Eight-year-old Caroline thinks about him a lot. Not because she misses him – she *never* misses him, she says emphatically – but because she worries that he might be angry with her. She recalls an incident in which he shouted at her, and is clearly afraid of him. "He's got a gun and bullets," she explains. "I'm scared he'll get them and shoot me."

"We're never going to get peace until either he dies or my mum dies. That's the way I often feel about it."

Caroline's fear is neither incidental nor unjustified. She has been witness to violence on many occasions. One episode in particular has affected her: "He attacked someone in front of us. Gave him a nosebleed and all that. And right after he just told him to calm down and not be so aggressive. Then after he'd done it he said: 'Caroline and Tobias, go to your room."

That kind of experience is a source of worry and anxiety and is hard to abstract away from, since the family never knows when Caroline's stepfather is going to turn up again. Sometimes he rings and threatens them, while other times he seeks them out at home. "When he comes and wants in, he just breaks the door down – even though we've got chains on it. One time he kicked it down so we had to run out the back. My grandmother lived a few rows down, so we had to leg it all the way over to hers. But then it turned out she wasn't in, so we had to shove Caroline in through the window – she was only little then – and then she had to go round and let us in so we could hide. He comes after us, you see, and he gives us these weird stares. You can see how mad he is. He says he's going to come and kill us all."

Amalie explains that they have often called the police, only to be told nothing can be done about it: "They never bother to turn up, because as soon as we say his name they just say there's nothing they can do – because he attacks them, as well. But I mean why can't they send someone who *can* do something about it? Instead of just saying: If it's him, we can't do anything, so you'll just have to sort it out yourselves. I feel like that about the whole society, I mean, we're never going to get peace until either he dies or my mum dies. That's the way I often feel about it."

Children with disabilities

The Council spoke to four children suffering from disabilities. Patrick (13) suffers from a condition that means that his legs are easily broken. Line (13) is impaired by a weakness in her left leg and hand – both are considerably smaller than those on her right, she explains. Pernille (12), suffers from spastic cerebral palsy. Louis (15) also suffers from spasticity and is dependant on his wheelchair and crutches.

Life with a disability: limitations and opportunities

Each in his or her own way, the four children all experience how their disabilities limit their physical mobility and thereby their opportunities of taking part in the communities of their peers. None of them knows what it's like to run around and play football with their classmates, and for Patrick this is one of the things he misses the most. Gym lessons have to be skipped, meaning that he must spend the time at home instead. He doesn't complain about it, though he actually is very fond of playing sport. He wishes there were sports clubs suited to his needs. His parents have been looking for somewhere for some time, but it seems that disabled sports is for adults only. "It's about time they got their act together and did something for children, too," Patrick comments.

Line does not feel restricted in the same way as regards leisure activities. She attends art classes, physical exercises, riding, family swimming and occupational therapy, so her week is packed with things to do. However, there are also occasions on which she is prevented from taking part on the same terms as her peers: "It's mostly because of my hand. Sometimes, if I have to hang from the wall bars and lift my legs up to my tummy, I can't do it. My hand slips."

"I used to be like a snail before. If we were playing tag, I was always the one to be caught first. But now I've had an operation that's made a certain ligament longer in my leg."

Pernille says that her disability used to limit her more than it does now: "I used to be like a snail before. If we were playing tag, I was always the one to be caught first. But now I've had an operation that's made a certain ligament longer in my leg." Patrick, too, has experience of operations – many, in fact. Since the age of nine he has undergone surgery on no less than 15 occasions.

Disability and school

The four children do not generally see themselves as being that much different from their peers. They all attend ordinary schools, where they are given extra support. But going to school has not always been that easy. Louis doesn't think he has been teased that much, yet reveals that he was subjected

to unpleasant physical malice at his previous school: "It's because there was a thing on my wheelchair that you could hold onto, so you could tip it forward if you were going uphill. Well, they used to do that sometimes, which was pretty annoying. And they didn't stop when I told them not to. The teachers said that if I got teased, then I should come and tell them about it, but maybe I was too scared, because I never did. I just thought it would most probably stop at some point. I was a bit naïve, you could say," says Louis.

Patrick has never been teased, but has a series of unpleasant experiences to recount from the time when he was confined to a wheelchair. "All you want to do is run around with your friends and have fun, but you're just stuck to this wheelchair … And when there were trips from school, I wasn't always able to go." Patrick recalls one time in particular, when he and the class were on a trip to Copenhagen. On the way back, they were hurrying to catch a train, and all of a sudden there was no-one left to give Patrick a hand. The whole class caught the train home, leaving Patrick behind. Eventually, he had to call his parents at home and arrange for them to come and pick him up. The whole experience was thoroughly unpleasant – and Patrick still vividly recalls how angry his parents were about it.

On the whole, Patrick is happy at school, though he remembers how he was teased in first grade: "They called me Hopalong." Fortunately, the school took firm action and made sure that Patrick was fully integrated into his class and could take on the same responsibilities as his classmates, even fetching milk at break.

Exercise

Having a physical disability like Louis, Line, Patrick and Pernille means having to exercise one's muscles all the time. Exercise is something all four children accept as a natural part of their lives. Louis and Pernille tell us that they can feel the difference when they have exercised intensively or taken part in an exercise project. It is clearly the case that gaining tangible results gives the children extra motivation – even if their training programmes are both time-consuming and physically demanding. Louis proudly recounts that he is now able to negotiate stairs, and does so every day, to and from the third floor.

"It's because there was a thing on my wheelchair that you could hold onto, so you could tip it forward if you were going uphill. Well, they used to do that sometimes, which was pretty annoying. And they didn't stop when I told them not to.

Normally, he goes to a special training centre: "But they just help me keep it up," Louis says. The major fruits came after he took part in an intensive training camp in Poland, a place where quite different methods were employed compared to back home. He is sorry that the same programme is not available in Denmark and dreams of going back again to repeat the experience. As long as the results are good, the harsh regime, embracing only a minimum of leisure days during the month the programme lasts, doesn't matter so much: "But it's a bit difficult because I've got my school to keep up, and it's not always the case that it fits in with holidays or the money situation. My mum has to arrange things as well, so she can go with me," says Louis.

Parental frustration

Having a physical disability, there is often a need for various aids and resources. In the case of Patrick and Louis, their main aids have been wheelchairs and crutches. But getting hold of the right aids is not always

that easy. Applications have to be made and approved, and the aids themselves have to be tried out and renewed. When the children grow, they grow out of their wheelchairs. The children tell us that their repeated trips to the aid centre to be fitted out are time-consuming and a source of considerable frustration. Moreover, they find their parents are involved in a constant battle with local authorities as regards financial support. Patrick used to have an off-roader, of which he was extremely fond. Only now, the authorities won't let him have a new one. He tells us that his family is not on the best of terms with the disability centre: "They all hate us there," Patrick feels.

The children are affected by the frustrations of their parents, for instance following meetings with social workers. "I can always tell if it's gone well, or if it was crap," Patrick says. "And I can tell if they've got one of those let-downs – how annoyed they are. Last time, though, they were happy when they came home again." Pernille, too, is aware that the issue of support can be fraught with problems. Her mother has applied for a car. "Because sometimes in the winter, when it's really cold, I can hardly walk half a kilometre … But our local authority don't think I qualify for it," she tells us.

For the sake of community

All four children are able to point to a range of areas in which more consideration should be taken of children with disabilities. The place the children are most, outside the home, is the school. Here, however, there are often many hindrances to be negotiated. Patrick tells us it took his parents four months to get the school to provide a ramp for his wheelchair. Without it, his father had to carry him up and down the school steps every morning and afternoon. Thankfully, the school has now shown consideration by deciding not to move Patrick's class to the floor above – as is customary at Patrick's level – and instead allowing them to remain on the ground floor.

Louis was not quite as fortunate. At his previous school, stairs were a daily challenge. His class being set to move upstairs was a contributory factor to the family deciding on a change of schools. "They'd given me permission to stay inside at break times, but I felt it could get to be a bit lonely, so I didn't want to, really," Louis relates.

Children in asylum centres

In January, the National Council for Children visited the Avnstrup asylum centre. Here, we have talked with Kamal (14) and his sister Fahima (15) from Afghanistan, as well as the three siblings Anya (8), Miha (10), and Petar (12) from Chechnya. Both families have – on the time of the interviews – been in Denmark for some six months and are awaiting the decision of the authorities as to whether they will be granted residence here.

Avnstrup forever

All five children were happy to be at the centre, though Anya, 8, and her older brother Miha, 10, were most positive. They compared the place favourably with the Sandholm facility where – like all asylum seekers – they were initially placed. Miha says: "We're much better off here than at Sandholm. There was nothing good about Sandholm. There was no-one to play with, unlike here. There are some others from Chechnya that we play with. We play football … and play all sorts of games." Friendships are crucial to children's sense of well-being, and for that reason it is little wonder that the opportunity of being with peers impacts on the children's evaluation of life at the centre.

"I'd like to stay here at Avnstrup. Forever, if we can."

When Miha thinks about what he wants for the future, he says: "I'd like to stay here at Avnstrup. Forever, if we can." At first, his response seems surprising, but Miha and his family have not enjoyed a stable home for several years and have been moved between various asylum centres in a number of countries. He and his siblings have tried making new friends, only to have to move away soon afterwards. Insecurity as to what the future may bring, and worries about having to expend new energy on establishing new relations, are both factors that prompt Miha to wish he could stay forever.

Petar, 12, explains that it's quite normal to miss your home country and the place you're from. "Everyone does," he says. "I didn't have many friends at home – but I miss the ones I had. Most of all, though, I miss my grandparents, and I speak to them a lot on the phone." Petar especially misses his grandmother. "I can't imagine never seeing her again," he says. Petar's wish for the future is that she be allowed to be with them here: "That's the only thing I want. Just to be able to stop here, and for her to be with us. I'd like to go on living at Avnstrup."

Petar explains that the family have tried being refugees once before and were placed in an asylum centre in Poland. He is not familiar with the complex set of international regulations that decide his family's destiny, and is able only to tell us what happened. "We were detained in Germany first, then sent to Poland. My dad had wanted to go somewhere else, I don't know where. When they detained us for the second time in Germany, my dad wasn't with us. Then we had to go back to Chechnya. After three years we had to try again, so we went to Poland, because there were no other ways, no other opportunities. But I didn't like it in Poland, it wasn't a very good place we were at. We were there for two years. There were others from Chechnya there

as well, but them from Poland, they don't like Chechnyans – I don't know why – so we were always getting in fights."

School in Denmark

The children at Avnstrup are bussed every day to a school in Lynge, where they receive instruction in e.g. Danish, maths and English. It's an hour-long trip. Kamal, 14, and Fahima, 15, from Afghanistan are very happy with the school, the teaching they receive, and the way in which they are treated by the teachers. They compare the school with their own back in Afghanistan. Fahima says: "The teachers in Afghanistan aren't very professional. Standards are low – that is, the teachers aren't very good, so you can't really get on. Here, it's different – the level and the way the teachers are with the children, the way they speak to the children and spend time with them in the breaks. It's not at all like Afghanistan where you always have to do this and do that all the time. Here, there's a lot more to do at the school than just homework. You really feel you get something out of it, and that it's worthwhile spending your time wisely." Fahima and Kamal are both ambitious at school. Fahima dreams of becoming an engineer, while Kamal wants to be an astronaut.

The teaching, and the care and attention Fahima and her brother have received from the school, are the things that have surprised her the most. Fahima gets on very well with her teachers and considers them as friends. The teachers are also very important to Anya, who is only eight. She tells us that she goes to the teacher whenever she feels sad or upset about anything.

Worrying about mum and the future

Uncertainty as to the family's future obviously impacts on time spent waiting at the asylum centre. This is true not least of the parents and the oldest children, yet while the three young children from Chechnya are not burdened by worries, they nevertheless are able to sense whenever their mother is feeling down. Ten-year-old Miha says: "We don't know what's going to happen to our family. Sometimes, our mum wants to go back home, but our life wasn't very good there. She misses our grandmother. I want to stay here, but I don't know about mummy. She's upset sometimes." Miha's younger sister Anya, 8, adds: "We try to cheer her up and call for daddy. Then he does his best for her to be happy again."

"I can see she's upset sometimes. So then I try to talk to her and give her hope for the future, talk about the good things that can happen for us."

Fahima, 15, and Kamal, 14, are also attentive to their mother's state of mind. They explain: "Our mum doesn't really have anything to do here, she's just at home – apart from once a week when she goes to school. She's happy that we're all safe now, and that we go to school and are happy. She's glad about all that – and we are, too – but there's always a worry about the future and about everything that's happened. I mean, she's no idea what's to become of us in the long run. I can see she's upset sometimes. So then I try to talk to her and give her hope for the future, talk about the good things that can happen for us."

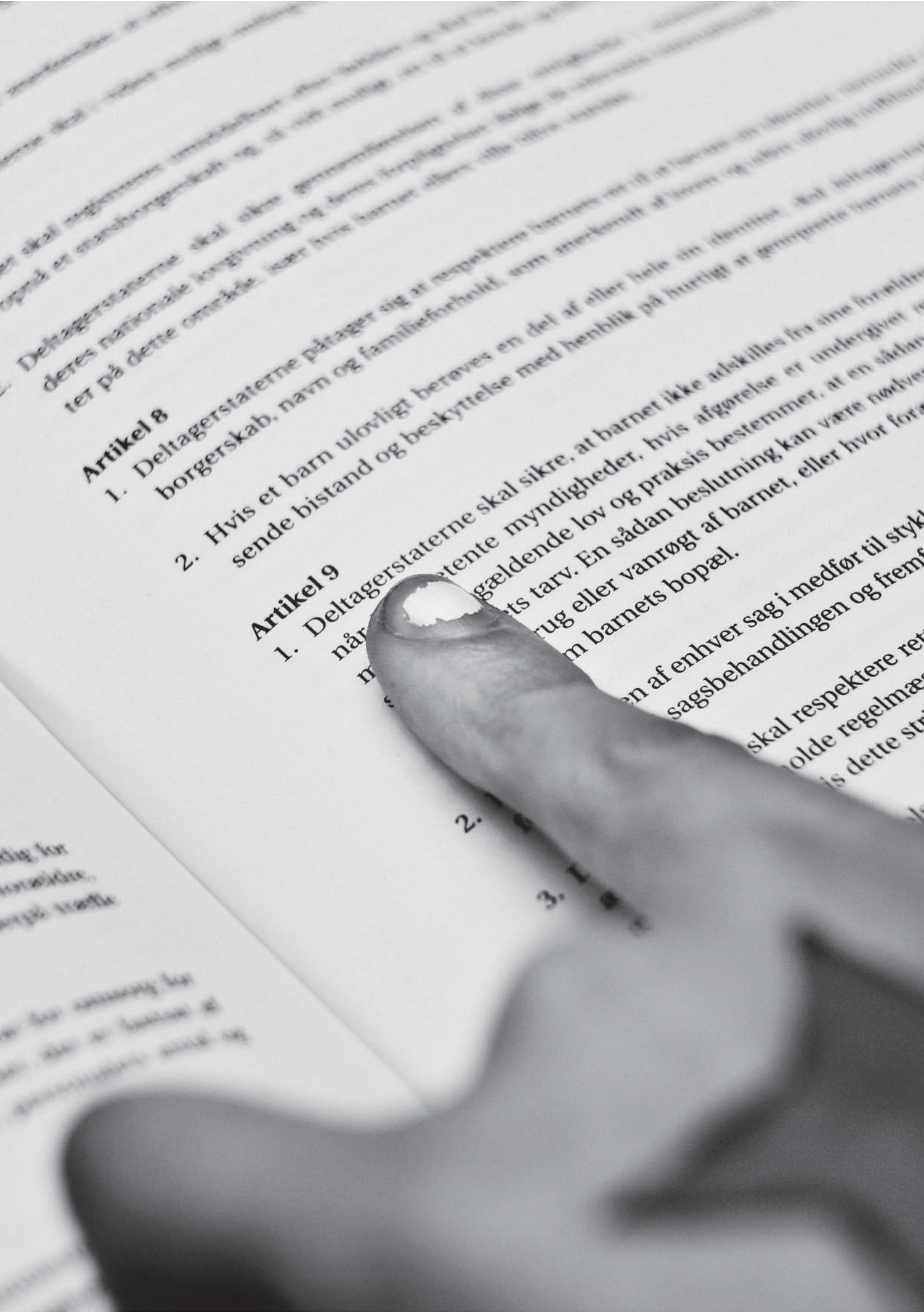
The two teenagers are affected by their mother's worrying, yet they have their own concerns, too. Fahima says: "All my worries make me stressed. I really think about it all the time. I try to keep myself occupied so as not to think about it so much and just go to school and be with the other children and the teachers – me and my brother both really want to learn Danish. It's just all the things we've been through that have been so hard and so trying." Fahima begins to cry as she explains how she tries to avoid thinking

and talking about the things they have experienced, because she finds it so hard. Especially when the conversation turns to the issue of why the family left Afghanistan, she finds it difficult to hold back the tears. "We had some difficulties that meant we had to get out. It wasn't anything political, but because of the way things were in the country, the Taliban and that … It was what we all wanted, but it was my mother's decision. I find it very difficult to talk about, because it's something that worries me day and night – I can't sleep at night for thinking about it all."

"I really don't know what I would do in that situation … How can you go back? There's nothing there for us any more."

Fahima tries not to think about what the family will do if they are not allowed to stay in Denmark: "I've no idea what I'll do if they don't let us stay here. I daren't look that far ahead. I've really no idea. We've heard about people being rejected and told they have to return to Afghanistan. I really don't know what I would do in that situation … How can you go back? There's nothing there for us any more. My father's dead, and we've sold everything. I really hope we can stay here. Hope's the only thing I have. If I didn't hope, I wouldn't even be here a day longer. I'd kill myself, believe me. This is my hope, here."

Fahima thinks it's hard not to be in control of her own life. She tells us she spent five months getting to Denmark and lost everything along the way, apart from a handful of clothes. They have now stayed at three different asylum centres, but Fahima feels she must believe it will all turn out to be worth it. She says: "I'd like a good and peaceful future, and even though I'm now here and not always able to decide for myself where I want to live, and where we're sometimes moved from place to place, I know that at some point I'll be able to make my own decisions – decide where I want to live, what I want to be, who I want to marry, and generally just decide for myself … but I'd never be able to do that in Afghanistan. I wouldn't ever have the same opportunities there for being in charge of my life. And my hopes are no different than those of any other young person."



Children on the wrong side of the law

The Council interviewed four youngsters, all of whom have committed various sorts of crime. Laila and Sarah have both just turned 15 and are placed at a 24-hour care centre for young criminals. Amir (16) and Mikkel (17), have been placed in a secure institution for children and young adults. Both are in the custody of the social authorities pending sentence. Amir has been there for five months and expects to receive his sentence within the next month, while Mikkel will be in court next week after a year in custody.

Four kids with chequered careers
All four have lived vagrant lives since childhood, all are readily familiar with abuse, violence and other types of crime, and stable adult role-models have been lacking in each case. Their criminal lives began at an early age. Fifteen-year-old Sarah's childhood was dominated by a series of placements, and her curriculum vitae now includes vandalism, arson and violent crime. The same is true of Laila, whose record spans car theft, robbery, theft, violence against public officials, random assault and grievous bodily harm. Matter-of-factly, she tells us that she was booked for 32 different incidents during a six-month period. The first time sixteen-year-old Amir was run in by the police was when he was 13 and stole a boat together with a friend. Since then, he has been involved in drug circles, running his own little "business" selling hash. Now he is in custody because of what he refers to as a "gun drama". Mikkel, 17, can't remember the first time he committed a crime, but recalls being caught shoplifting at an early age. Since then, he has done home robberies, car and motorcycle theft, break-ins and vandalism. He is now detained in connection with a killing, though he insists he had nothing to do with it.

Detention and prison
All four youngsters tell us they have previously spent time in detention – even though they were under the age of 15. The two boys have also spent time in prison with adult prisoners. Amir recalls what it was like: "It was hard, man. They kept me in isolation, because I was under eighteen. There's nothing to do other than watch TV all the time. You can't get out to stretch your legs, you lose weight, the food's shit, there's no sunlight …"

"I was in the cell for 23 hours and wasn't allowed to talk to my dad or have visitors or anything."

Asked whether he has ever spent time in isolation, Mikkel responds: "The first two weeks I was in detention in Maribo because there was no room at a youth centre. So I had to sit it out down there. There was no-one else under eighteen, and you're not allowed to talk to them who are older. So it was the same as isolation, really, just not official. I was in the cell for 23 hours and wasn't allowed to talk to my dad or have visitors or anything."

Significant adults
Many adults have passed through the lives of these youngsters, though mainly professionals such as social workers, educators and counsel assigned to them

by the authorities. When Sarah was forcibly removed from her mother, she was assigned a solicitor. "He spoke up for me," she recalls, though without conviction. She also relates her experience of being involved in the procedure: "I mean, they ask you like: 'What do you think would be best for you?' If you give them an answer, they all sit umming and ahing over it. There's six or seven women, yeah? But they don't listen to what you're actually saying, they just sit there reading a piece of paper that says you've been pretty violent. But I've changed a lot since then, I can control myself now. Do you understand what I'm saying? They don't try to get to know the person at all." In that way, Sarah feels the adults pass judgment on her without giving her a fair chance.

Although Sarah is unhappy about having to stay at her present institution, she nevertheless has a certain amount of respect for the adults who work there. It's an opinion shared by Mona. She finds it positive that the adults lay down clear rules and that breaking them involves consequences. At Mona's previous institution, they were allowed to stay out until three in the morning. "It was as if they just couldn't care less about you," she says.

Indeed, in the eyes of the children themselves, only a small minority of adults involved in their lives have ever cared at all. Amir and Sarah are fully aware of who they can trust and approach in the final outcome: their grandmothers. "Of all grown-ups, I'm closest to my Nan. She's always been the one to look after me, and I've always been able to come to her with anything," Amir says.

Preventive measures

When it comes to crime prevention, the youngsters all know that the role played by adults is crucial. Mona thinks there should be more teachers and recreation-club workers of different ethnic backgrounds than Danish. Sarah believes having someone you can be frank with to be the most important thing of all: "Like, if I've been smoking joints, you know? Then I don't really know who to tell. It's like you need help, because you can't handle it on your own. So there should be someone else you could tell that sort of thing to, do you know what I mean?" Sarah has found out that her girlfriend has stopped "doing all sorts of shit" after having been assigned a special contact individual. Sarah hopes for something similar in her own case.

"You should never make kids feel you're against them, because otherwise they'll do things in spite."

Mikkel, too, believes it important to build contact with an adult during a longer period of time. Yet he has his own negative experience with it: "If you attach yourself to someone in a care centre – well, you can't really, because sooner or later they send you off somewhere else. You never see those people again. So it's a let-down all over again, because all of a sudden they're gone. I don't feel good about that."

However, Mikkel does emphasise the role of parental guidance as a preventive measure: "A lot of the time, it's the parents who deal with things the wrong way." Therefore, he believes more children and young adults should be removed from their parents, though he does find it important that parents receive guidance as to how to go about things more appropriately: "I think it's actually the parents who need help – to help their kids, you know what I mean? You should never make kids feel you're against them, because otherwise they'll do things in spite," he explains.

What about the future?

Like most youngsters, Sarah, Mona, Amir and Mikkel wonder about what the future has in store. Sarah doesn't know what she wants to

do, but one thing is certain: no more school. For her, the school system has only ever led her to failure. She doubts things will ever be any different. For all four, thoughts of the future are closely wound up with thoughts about the past. All maintain clear desires to reject a life of crime.

"Ideally, you need a good childhood. It's important that you're allowed to be a *child*."

Mona recalls that at first she found it exciting to be mentioned in the news media for the things she was doing. Now, though, she looks differently upon it: "You get to the point where you think: What am I doing? I'm a girl, why am I going around doing stuff like this?" Sarah has had the same thoughts: "When they took me away from my family for two years, I really started thinking about what I'd been up to, you know? I mean, I'm like fifteen now, you know what I mean? In three years I'll be eighteen. I realised I have to start thinking about my future. So then I just stopped what I was doing automatically."

For Mikkel, his encounter with the prison system changed the way he thought about school. "It's not like I'm saying if only I could turn the clock back, then I'd never have done it. But I've come a long way after being in prison. I'm clean now, I don't do drugs any more, and I'll soon be finished with my exams." Having almost completed his school education means an enormous amount to Mikkel. Not only as regards his future opportunities, but also in terms of self-knowledge and self-esteem.

One challenge facing all four youngsters is how to navigate their way through new and old friendships in the future. The boys in particular are aware that their social circles need to be reconsidered, most of their friends belonging to criminal environments. Mikkel hopes that the Prison Service will allow his local authority to decide where he is to go on his release, so that he can get away from his old circles. "As long as people don't know me then I've almost got a free choice about who I want to talk to in the class, you know what I mean? I can stay away from the bad influences then," he says firmly.

The good life

Mona, Sarah, Amir and Mikkel were asked the question: what is important for a child to lead a good life in today's Denmark? Their responses indicate that their own special experiences are carried with him. For instance, Mikkel responds: "Ideally, you need a good childhood. It's important that you're allowed to be a child, and not have adult things to do. For example, if you're only six, you shouldn't have to be taking responsibility for all sorts of stuff. And when you're thirteen you shouldn't have to be the one who does the cleaning and so on. When I was living with my mum, it was mostly me who was responsible for things. With my dad it was different. But if children have to take on responsibilities, then they're almost their own boss and can decide for themselves. So when I was with my dad I couldn't accept him being in charge and deciding over me, because I was used to deciding myself. And that's not good."

Sarah, too, has reflected on her childhood. She says: "I'm fifteen now, you know what I mean? And I've been through a lot more than most fifteen-year-olds. So that's probably why I did most of the stuff I did." Her childhood experience, she believes, finds expression in the way she is today. She concludes by saying: "It's also because you're so angry inside, do you understand what I'm saying? It had to all come out somehow …"

Children of inmates

The Council took part in two weekend sessions organised by SAVN, an association for children and other family of inmates. On these occasions, the Council interviewed 13 children: Sille (7) and her friend Sofie (8), the two sisters Maja (17) and Maria (14), Anja (13) and her brother Jimmi (15), Niclas (10), the three friends Tea (12), Emma (12) and Ann (12), and finally Noah (12), and the two brothers Mike (9) and Lukas (12).

Visiting in prison

Despite having many different stories to tell, the children have much in common in terms of experiences and feelings. For many, this is not the first time their father has served sentence, so some of the children have visited prisons or remand centres on a number of previous occasions. Twelve-year-old Emma describes her encounter with one of the places she has visited: "There's a huge wall and a fence around. You're really penned in, and there are no colours, only grey, black and brown. I think it's a really horrid place for a child." Maja, 17, acknowledges Emma's experience: "You're let into this little room – not his own room, because that's not allowed – but a visiting room. You can sit there and watch telly or whatever. So I think children feel like they're imprisoned themselves when they come visiting. That's how I felt, anyway."

The place where Mike and Lucas' father is serving his sentence now is quite nice, because there are toys and other children. Yet they still clearly recall how things were to begin with. "It was really horrible. There were these huge policemen just standing there all the time like this." Lukas, 12, folds his arms to illustrate. "They just stood there staring at you, and if you wanted to say anything you had to whisper."

When visiting, many of the children have found that there are certain things which they are not allowed to bring in with them. Sille, 7, remembers how, when she was four, she was prevented from bringing a doll in with her. "I just wanted to show it to my dad – but they wouldn't let me. They said I might have something *inside* it. So it made me angry – and sad." Maja, who is now 17, recalls her visits as a small child: "I can remember from when we were little – if there was something we'd made for him in woodwork or art, they'd always have to open the parcel. I remember thinking it was so lousy. It was humiliating. They'd just tear it all open and they never bothered to wrap it up again afterwards. I just thought: They can't be *that* busy, that they can't do it nicely – or just say they need to take a look."

Like many of the other children, Niclas, 10, is unhappy that visiting times are so short. He says: "I always feel sad when we have to go. My dad gets upset, too, sometimes. He tells me he misses me."

Police and prison officers

The first time Maja's father was home on a weekend release, he was accompanied by a female police officer. "She was really nice – and good at making it all work. We made a kind of monster out of a cardboard box and cut holes for the eyes and put hair on. She was really good at playing with me," Maja recalls. Her general picture of prison officers, however, is that they "could do with smiling a

bit more and learning to say hello." Ten-year-old Niclas and Emma and Anna, both 12, find prison staff friendly, though Tea (also 12) is less than impressed: "Those policemen – they make me feel sick," she says. Noah, 12, relates an encounter with the police prior to the children's father being arrested. "I remember the doorbell rang. My mum went and opened it, and it was the police asking if they could come in. So she let them in thinking they just wanted a chat. But then they went through the whole house rummaging in all the cupboards and throwing things onto the floor, documents and things – and they broke some glasses and stuff … So we started to cry, because the police had wrecked almost the whole house."

Where's Daddy gone?

When a child's father goes to prison, the child is not necessarily immediately informed. Several of the children with whom the Council spoke found that their mothers lied to them to begin with. Lukas is one of them: "My mum just told us Dad was over in Jutland with his friend Jannick." The story Tea's mother invented was rather more exotic. Tea recalls: "I was five when they told me. I'd been asking if I could phone my daddy. But I couldn't, because he was in South Africa, my mum said. And then a couple of months later a letter came from him, and then she told me he was in prison." The mother of Noah and Ann also tried to shield them from the truth. "But then one day she started crying. We tried to comfort her and then she told it like it was. I think we were six when we were told. And then we started crying, as well," twelve-year-old Noah recalls.

When the children are old enough, their mothers may tell them the truth, though not necessarily. Maja, 17, heard rumours about her father for years, taking them as an attack on her own person, as well as a slander against her father. Her reactions were violent, both physically and verbally. Some friendships went by the wayside on account of her not knowing the truth. However, she is still quick to defend her mother: "My mum was just so sick and tired of always having to be the one to tell us what he'd been up to – of him never being man enough to do it himself. Even now he still says it was just a bit of thieving. Just to please us. But then I'll say: 'Hang on a bit, I do know what you did'. And then we'll end up joking about it."

Though unfamiliar with the details of the case, Noah was told his father had been charged with manslaughter. He soon got to know more. "I read the paper myself at school. My teacher showed it to me and said I ought to see it. But I only got through half a page, because I was crying so much I couldn't read any more. That was in third grade. Before we told the class."

"That's just the way it is with him. It's just the way he's my dad. I've got used to it."

Coming clean in school

Having your father go to prison can be a heavy burden to bear, especially if it's kept secret. The vast majority of children choose to confide in a close friend, or else the child's mother or teacher will help inform the class. Reactions vary. Emma, 12, is annoyed about the other girls trying to show sympathy and telling her they know how hard it must be for her: "But they don't. They don't have a dad in prison," says Emma. Noah, 12, says that the other children in class were somewhat taken aback when they heard about his dad: "They asked a few questions, but I was too upset to answer, so my teacher answered instead. But then, after a month or so, they started teasing me about it – so maybe telling them wasn't the right thing to do. But then, I suppose they had to know sooner or later," he muses. Noah is not the only one to have been teased. Tea, also 12, tells us about one particular

tormentor: "He'd got everyone believing I was a bit weird – because my dad had killed someone, and that I could do so, too. So they started calling me psycho. And he kept doing these drawings of me killing someone, or of my dad, that sort of thing."

Nine-year-old Mike and his brothers have also been teased because of their father. Mike has borne the brunt. From the very outset, in kindergarten class, Mike has defended himself physically – even against children two and three years older than himself. His elder brother Lukas is sad about his little brother being teased at school. He explains that children are often vulnerable in the school playground, where adults hardly ever are present. It angers him. "Where are they all? They're so fucking lazy – sorry for swearing. But they need to get more staff, as soon as anyone gives a shit," he states.

Maja, 17, also recalls the difficulty of telling others that her father was in prison, though she no longer minds talking about it. The last time he served a sentence, Maja went off to a continuation school where she told it like it was. She explains: "I don't consider it to be anything special any more. He's been inside so many times before, I've got a bit complacent about it. That's just the way it is with him. It's just the way he's my dad. I've got used to it."

"I really needed to share all the things I was thinking about with my father, and I actually did write the letter – telling him what my thoughts were about being with him at that time. But I never sent it for the thought of the police reading it all through first, it being so personal and all."

The need to talk to Dad

When children have been separated from their fathers for long periods, they miss him, and the need arises to share their thoughts with him. Ann, 12, has discovered that she can Skype with her father at night when prison officers no longer keep watch. Often, she stays up until three in the morning talking to him. She can also see him via webcam.

Maja has been through her ups and downs with her father. The things she witnessed made her report him to the police. During the time that followed she felt the need to write him a letter telling him how she felt. "But when they're in detention you can't give them anything or send them letters, unless you want them opened and people to see what's in them. I really needed to share all the things I was thinking about with my father, and I actually did write the letter – telling him what my thoughts were about being with him at that time. But I never sent it. I couldn't stand the thought of the police reading it all through first, it being so personal and all."

Even after Maja's father has been granted parole, Maja and her sister Maria, 14, still find it difficult talking to him. He promises to spend time with them, but instead goes out with others, or else simply seems absent. Maria comments: "He's the best dad in the world, no doubt about that – he's really caring and loving and all that. I just wish he was there more often. I mean, *really* there – when we're actually together. But he is a good father, and I wouldn't swap him for the world. I just wish he'd pull himself together a bit more. He needs to learn how to behave like a normal person. But that's hard when you've been in prison most of your life since you were seventeen."

Being let down

A large number of the children whose fathers are in prison have had their father let them down or lie to them. Maja's and Maria's father tells them a lot of things that aren't true,

including the date of his release. They are quite aware that he does so in order to please them, but with time they have learned to see through him. “He hasn’t really understood that it hurts more than it pleases, looking forward to him coming out, and then him not getting out anyway. He thinks it makes the wait shorter for us. Then he’ll say he’ll be out in two months – and then two months more – and another two months again,” they say. They both are able to recount long stories of being let down time and again, because their father was unable to keep a promise while on parole.

Noah and Ann don’t see much of their father – they aren’t taken to visit, and as yet he is ineligible for parole. He was supposed to be there for Noahs 12th birthday, and although both children were greatly looking forward to the occasion, he failed to turn up. The whole day was spent waiting. “We’d thought he was coming at eleven, but when he didn’t arrive then, we reckoned he’d be there at two, and if he wasn’t there at two, he’d be there at five. We spent all day just waiting for him. It wasn’t very nice at all. My mum had bought *loads* of food, because he’s got a really big appetite … and then he let me down. All because he was out drinking.” Noah begins to cry, but continues: “All the time we’d thought he was going to come. For me it just meant something that he came to my birthday – all other days he could do what he liked. If he had to drink, he could at least have done it some other day. And not on *my* day.” The experience has rooted itself deeply. When Noahs father apologised some days later, Noah refused to accept. But now he says: “But sooner or later you have to forgive. You can’t go round being angry with him a whole year. After all, he’s still my dad.”

Mikkel, 17, has been placed in a secure institution where he is awaiting sentence. During his stay, he has spent time reading the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. He says:

It was because I read in the papers that they were violating a lot of children's rights by putting them in prison. So I thought I'd try reading what it says, The Rights of the Child. I thought there might be something in it that could help me. I got one of the social workers here to print me a copy out and spent a bit of time reading through it. There's a lot of good stuff in it. You can't just take away children's dignity and that – which you do, in a way, if you keep them separated from their families, don't you?

I've studied most of what it says. You have to know your rights, otherwise they won't let you do anything at all.

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